



LIVERPOOL HOPE
UNIVERSITY
175 YEARS OF ACADEMIC
EXCELLENCE

Library & Learning Spaces

Doing a literature search: a step by step guide

Written by the Subject Librarians

Last updated October 2023

What is a literature search?

A literature search is a systematic, thorough search of all types of published literature to identify a breadth of good quality references relevant to a specific topic, and is a fundamental element of the methodology of any research project. The success of a research project is dependent on a thorough review of the academic literature at the outset - getting the literature search right will save hours of time in the long run. Effective literature searching is a critical skill in its own right and will prove valuable for any future information gathering activity whether within or outside of academia.

In practice, books and journals are the main source of information for most in-depth literature searches related to an extended essay, dissertation or research project. However, depending on your topic, many other sources will prove equally valuable such as newspaper archives, images, primary data and conference proceedings.

Why carry out a literature search?

There are several aims of this kind of search:

- to review existing critical opinions or theories
- to identify current research findings
- to identify potential research methods or models
- to enable comparison with your own research findings

The literature search can be a time-consuming job, so it pays to be well prepared before beginning.

The stages of the literature search

A good literature search entails systematically working through steps 1-5:

- 1, Background reading and preparation
- 2, Working with your title - identifying search terms
- 3, Identifying the resources to search
- 4, Searching - using search techniques
- 5, Collating your results

Let's take a look at these 5 stages in detail:

1, Background reading and preparation

Start with some background reading - textbooks, subject encyclopaedias etc. - to get a grasp of the context of the topic and the terminology used in its discussion. Questions you need to ask include:

- what led to the choice of this topic as an extended research project?
- is there a seminal book or journal article on the topic?
- is the subject currently being discussed in the media?
- do you have personal knowledge or experience of the topic?

Identify a small amount of reading material informed by the above to give you an overview of the topic. A good seminal book or journal article related to the topic may contain useful suggestions for further reading.

2, Working with your title - identifying search terms

At the outset of a literature search it is important to identify as much of the key terminology associated with the topic as possible. This could include:

- important authors
- theories or concepts
- key research reports or legislation
- major genres or movements

The simplest starting point for identifying such terms is to spend time thinking about the wording for the draft title of your research; from there it should be possible to identify several key elements.

For each of the key elements within the title think about:

- alternative terms or synonyms, words that mean the same thing, for example, an alternative term for *youth* may be *young adults*
- related terms or concepts, for example, related words to *children* are *girls, boys, teenagers* etc.

This approach can be used whatever the topic.

Let's take as an example a research project into the representation of women in 20th Century American crime films, with a draft working title:

The changing image of women in 20th century American crime films

This title has the following key elements:

crime films - the main topic of enquiry

portrayal of women - the particular angle of the research

America - the locational focus

20th century - the time period of interest

Take each key element of the draft title in turn

Crime films

Alternative terms	crime drama, crime melodrama, crime movie or movies, film noir, detective movie or movies
Related terms	crime film character types, such as femme fatale, private eye, private detective, gangsters

Women

Alternative terms	Woman, female or females, girl or girls, lady or ladies
Related terms	Gender, moll, femme fatale

America

Alternative terms	United States, United States of America, US, USA
Related terms	Hollywood. Specific studio names, for example, MGM, Universal. Specific directors, for example Alfred Hitchcock, Quentin Tarantino

20th century

Alternative	This can be written as numbers or letters
-------------	---

Related terms	specific time periods, 1940s 1950s and so on. Use words like modern or contemporary, post-war and so on.
---------------	--

Remember, no search engine whether in a database or on the Internet, is intuitive. Unless you think about the range of potential search terms you are certain to miss content that could be relevant.

3, Identifying the resources to search

Unfortunately, regardless of the subject you are studying, there is no one single source of information that will contain everything you need for your literature search, however, the library provides a single search tool called OneSearch which allows you to search many resources in one go. This gives access to many different online resources covering the research needs of all the different academic subjects. In practice, however, although you will need to give careful thought to the resources most likely to contain the relevant content, you should only need to search a relatively small number of resources.

A good starting point for your search is to use the search facility in OneSearch to perform a broad search of all the journal literature we have access to online. However, although this is useful in identifying some initial references, it is not an exhaustive and comprehensive search of the literature. For this you will need to search the individual resources directly in their own right. Do this by clicking on this link to the [**A to Z list of databases**](#).

There are some databases that contain exclusively full text articles, but most contain a mixture of full text and abstract only content, with the option to restrict your search to full text results only.

There are different types of databases:

Multi-disciplinary journal databases

Resources such as Academic Search Complete and Academic Onefile contain journal content across the range of academic subjects. Often multi-disciplinary databases contain professional and trade journals as well as academic peer reviewed journals. Usually, however, you can restrict your results to those from academic peer reviewed journals only.

Subject specific databases

These databases contain journal articles and/or other types of content relevant to a specific subject or group of related subjects. Examples include Science Direct, Education Research Complete, Westlaw and Performing Arts Periodicals Database.

Publishers' databases

Databases such as ScienceDirect, Sage Journals Online and Emerald contain journal content published by a particular publishing company. Such resources can be subject focused or multi-disciplinary.

Other types of content

There are a large number of non-journal databases that may also contribute to your literature search, such as e-books, newspapers, images, audio & video, legal and government information and encyclopaedias. You can access these via [Databases by Type](#).

4. Searching - using search techniques

Having identified potential search terminology and which databases to search, the quality of results will be improved by employing the following techniques.

As a general rule avoid using the 'simple' or 'basic' search option (only one text box), always use the **advanced search** (or multi-search box) option. Only in advanced search will you be able to use all the techniques that follow.

Word endings

Search engines won't automatically search for derivatives of the same word; for example, searching for the word *cinema* won't necessarily find *cinematics*. This may even be true for simple variants such as the singular and plural of the same word - *cinema* and *cinemas*. Inserting an **asterisk symbol** where the word ending changes will automatically search for all the endings for that word.

cinema*

Select a Field (optional) ▾

Cinema* will find: *cinema, cinemas, cinematic, cinematics*.

Linking terms together

To enter more than one term in a search engine link the terms with the connecting words, **AND / OR**.

Linking terms with the word – **AND** - will narrow your search, retrieving only results containing both terms.

Linking two terms with the word – **OR** - will broaden your search, finding results that contain either or both terms. For example:

films AND crime

Select a Field (optional) ▾

The above search will find only results that contain both words, film and crime. It won't retrieve results that just refer to *films* without any mention of *crime* nor *crime* without any mention of *films*.

films OR movies

Select a Field (optional) ▾

The above search will retrieve results that just mention *films*, results that just mention *movies* and results that mention both *films* and *movies*.

Variant spellings

Databases will only match on the specific word you enter. In practice this means they may not be capable of coping with variant spellings such as American - English variants, for example, searching for *colour* won't necessarily find results containing the American spelling *color*. Use - **OR** - between the two different spellings to find either.

Watch your spelling! Databases are notoriously unforgiving of misspelt words. A common reason for not finding the results you would expect is due to misspelt terms.

Exact phrase searching

Search terms expressed as a phrase, should be inserted in quotation marks, for example, “*crime films*”, “*United States*”, “*film noir*”. This ensures that the words will appear immediately next to each other in the text of the results.

"crime films"

Select a Field (optional) ▾

In the above search the word *crime* will always appear next to the word *films* in the results retrieved. Leaving out quotation marks will retrieve results with both words, but not necessarily with any contextual relevance. Put simply, the word *crime* may appear in one paragraph, the word *films* in another.

Currency

If currency, or a particular publication date range is important to the relevancy of the results retrieved, most databases will allow you to limit results to after, before or between specific publication dates. This can be a powerful way of limiting the results you find to those most relevant to your topic.

Think about where the database is looking for your search terms

Most databases allow you to specify where (i.e. what field) you wish the database to search. Some of the options are:

- All fields, (or full text, the whole document or similar wording)
- Authors
- Title
- Keywords
- Abstract
- Abstract, title and keywords all together

The below image is an example from one of the databases but all databases have different options so always look for the choices behind the drop-down arrow.



Searching for your search terms in the **title or abstract** fields is a good starting point because if your terms appear in the title, there's a good chance the results will have a high degree of relevance to your topic:

"crime films"	Select a Field (optional) ▾
---------------	-----------------------------

In the above example both the term *films* and the term *crime* will appear in the title of results retrieved.

If this doesn't find enough relevant material try searching in the **abstract / subject / keywords**.

NB abstracts are written in such a way that key terms describing the content of the article are always included. Therefore, if your search terms appear in the abstract, the article should have a high degree of relevancy.

In the example below both derivatives of the word *crime* (such as *crime*, *crimes*, *criminal*, *criminality*) and derivatives of the word *film* (*film*, *films*, *filming*) will appear in the abstract of the results retrieved.

Crim* AND film*	AB Abstract or Author-Supplied Abstract ▾
-----------------	---

Keywords or subject terms are assigned either by the author or the database producer to describe the main topics discussed in the publication. Again, if your search terms appear as keywords or subject terms the result should have a higher degree of relevancy to your topic.

Film* OR movies

SU Subject Terms ▾

In the above example either derivatives of *film* (film, films, filming) or *movies* will be found as subject terms that have been assigned to the results found.

If you don't specify where the database should search it will usually default to searching **all fields**. This usually means that all fields, including full text, will be searched. This is likely to retrieve very many results of only cursory relevance to your topic.

Searching using more than one search box

Most databases will allow more structured searching by giving the option to use more than one search box, usually the **advanced search** option.

Film OR movies

TI Title ▾

AND ▾

women OR gender

AB Abstract or Author-Supplied Abstract ▾

In the above example either the word *film* or the word *movies* will appear in the title of results. In addition to these terms appearing in the title, either the word *women* or the word *gender* will also appear in the abstract of results. This is because our two search lines have been linked with – **AND** – as in the example above.

To help you think about planning a search strategy for your own draft title, have a go at filling in the grid which can be found on our web pages.

5. Collating your results

Finally, it is important to analyse the material you find and group into some order of priority. Filter out any peripheral materials and consider storing them separately from your core references. Make use of personalisation features in OneSearch or within many of the individual databases to create an account and save your favourites. Some have the option to set up email alerts for when future matches to your search strategy appear.

If any of your core journal references are unavailable in full text from the database you have searched, remember you can use **OneSearch** to see if the full text of the article is available from any other database.

If journal articles or books you need are not available from online databases consider ordering them via the library's [inter library loans](#) service.

NB it is essential that at every stage you keep accurate records of all searches, sources, and all references found and used. This will not only help to keep control of your research, but will be vital when it comes to writing up your final bibliography and citations. Back-up your computer files every time you update them, use the

personalised features to set up profiles and save resources to your favourites, use the Pin to Favourites icon in [OneSearch](#) 

Glossary of terms

Explanations of terms you may come across when literature searching

Abstract

A summary which precedes the main text of a journal article. Brief results of any qualitative, quantitative or scientific research will usually be included.

Citation

Another word for reference. A journal article citation contains details of the journal it was published in for example journal title, year of publication, volume and issue number, article page numbers.

Database

An online collection of journal articles, e-books, newspapers etc.

Fields

Information on a database is divided into different ‘fields’ such as title, abstract, author, full text. Selecting ‘all fields’ usually means searching everywhere in the text including the reference information.

Full text

The journal article is available in full to be read online or downloaded.

Journal volume and issue number

When locating or referencing a journal article you must have the volume and issue number of the journal the article was published in. Volume usually refers to the year of publication for example 2012 = volume 1. Within a given journal volume, numbered issues are produced throughout the year for example 2012 vol. 1 no.1.

Keywords and subject terms

Keywords or subject terms are assigned either by the author or the database producer to describe the main topics discussed in the publication.

Library catalogue – within OneSearch

A database of all the items held by a particular library. The bulk of the items listed in a library catalogue will be either e-books or print books for borrowing.

Periodical

Another word for journal or magazine.

Personalisation

The ability to set up an account to save personal favourites, search strategies and email alerts for when new items come into the database.

Peer review

Articles published in academic or scholarly journals go through a process called peer review where the content is critiqued and reviewed by experts in the field prior to publication. Peer reviewed journal articles are considered the 'gold standard' and therefore very important to your literature search.

Popular journals and magazines

Publications aimed at the general public that, although reporting on serious subjects, are not peer reviewed. Examples include: The Economist, New Statesman, New Scientist, Times Literary Supplement, History Today.

Professional and trade magazines

Serious magazines aimed at practitioners within a specific field. Articles are not peer reviewed, but may provide useful commentary and news. Examples include: Community Care, Police Review, The Stage.

Subject favourites

Databases that are subject specific or are particularly good for a particular subject. See the full list of [Library Databases by Subject](#) on our web pages.

Subscribed or subscriptions

Some databases offer the option to limit results to 'subscribed sources' or 'my subscriptions'. This is similar to limiting results to full text. Choosing this option should only retrieve full text articles.

If you need more help with your literature search contact either your [Subject Librarian](#) or email AskaLibrarian@hope.ac.uk.

Remember you can book a Personal Library Tutorial with your Subject Librarian at any point in your studies for help with your literature searching.